

**Opening Statement
Chairman Mark Souder**

**“Fighting Meth in America’s Heartland: Assessing the Impact on Local Law
Enforcement and Child Welfare Agencies”**

**Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy,
and Human Resources
Committee on Government Reform**

July 26, 2005

Good afternoon, and thank you all for coming. Today we continue our Subcommittee’s work on the problem of methamphetamine trafficking and abuse – a problem that is ravaging the entire nation and putting a severe strain on law enforcement agencies and child welfare programs, particularly at the state and local levels.

Displayed on the video screens are a series of photographs that capture a young woman’s ten year progression and downward spiral resulting from methamphetamine addiction. These graphic photos demonstrate the real-life impact of meth abuse.

This is actually the ninth hearing focusing on meth held by the Subcommittee since 2001. In places as diverse as Indiana, Arkansas, Hawaii and Minnesota, I have heard gripping testimony about how this drug has devastated lives and families. But I have also learned about the many positive ways that communities have fought back, targeting the meth cooks and dealers, trying to get addicts into treatment, and working to educate young people about the risks of meth abuse.

Meth is one of the most powerful and dangerous drugs available, and one of the easiest to make. It can be “cooked” using common household or agricultural chemicals and simple cold medicines, following recipes easily available on the Internet. The drug is highly addictive and has multiple side effects, including psychotic behavior, physical deterioration, and brain damage. Death by overdose is a significant risk.

Most meth comes from the so-called “superlabs” in California and northern Mexico, and Congress is currently exploring ways to address that growing problem. However, it is frequently the smaller, clandestine or “clan” labs that generate so much damage and misery for local communities. The amount of meth that is created at these smaller labs is relatively small, yet the impact the labs have on the community is staggering, due to the environmental damage and health risks that they create.

The National Association of Counties (NACo) recently published two surveys which detail the impact that meth is having on law enforcement agencies and child welfare services. The surveys, entitled: “The Criminal Effect of Meth on Communities” and “The Impact of Meth on Children: Out of Home Placement” surveyed hundreds of counties nationwide on the effects of meth. The NACo law enforcement agency survey reported that nearly 60% of responding counties stated that methamphetamine was their largest drug problem.¹

The surveys provide further evidence of how the meth epidemic is quickly spreading across the nation, from rural to suburban and urban areas. In the NACo survey directed towards law enforcement agencies, the information on meth related arrests and meth cases overall was

¹ National Association of Counties. Surveys: “The Impact of Meth on Children: Out of Home Placement” and “The Criminal Effect of Meth on Communities”. July 5, 2005.

staggering. Of the 500 responding counties in the past year, 67% reported increases in meth related arrests. Counties in the Southwest reported particularly disturbing results, with 76% reporting such increases. Over half of the agencies surveyed stated that at least 1 in 5 jail inmates are serving methamphetamine related sentences.

The surveys also demonstrate that children are increasingly becoming the primary victims of meth abuse. The surveys found that 40% of child welfare agencies reported an increase in “out of home placements because of meth in the past year.”² This abuse unfortunately includes physical and mental trauma, and even sexual abuse. 69% of county social service agencies have indicated that they have had to provide additional, specialized training for their welfare system workers and have had to develop new and special protocols for workers to address the special needs of the children affected by methamphetamine.³ Community health and human services, as well as child welfare services such as foster-care, are being overwhelmed as a result of meth.

Officials at every level of government – federal, state and local – must take effective, coordinated action to address the meth epidemic. U.S. Attorney General Alberto Gonzales recently declared that, “in terms of damage to children and to our society, meth is now the most dangerous drug in America.”⁴ As Members of Congress, we need to take a careful look to see what additional legislation and resources are needed.

First, what forms of direct assistance – particularly in the expensive realm of environmental cleanup – should the federal government provide to local agencies when dealing with meth lab busts and their aftermath? Second, what kind of specialized training can and should the federal government provide to state and local agencies, both in the law enforcement and the child welfare services areas? And third, what are the “best practices” for dealing with children found at meth labs sites?

At today’s hearing, we will hear from the federal, state and local agencies that fight on the “front lines” against the meth epidemic. We welcome Mr. Scott Burns, Deputy Director for State and Local Affairs from the Office of National Drug Control Policy; Mr. Joseph Rannazzisi, Deputy Chief of the Office of Enforcement at the Drug Enforcement Administration; and Ms. Laura Birkmeyer, Assistant U.S. Attorney in San Diego, California and Chairperson of the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children.

On the second panel we will hear from Dr. Nancy Young, Director of the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare (which is funded by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, or SAMHSA) and Director of Children and Family Futures; Ms. Valerie Brown of the National Association of Counties; Ms. Freida Baker, Deputy Director of Family and Children’s Services at the Alabama Department of Human Resources; Chief Deputy Phil Byers from the Rutherford County (North Carolina) Sheriff’s Office; Ms. Sylvia Depoto, Deputy Director of Riverside County Children’s Services in California; Ms. Betsy Dunn, Investigator and Peer Supervisor from the Tennessee Department of Children’s Services, Child Protective Services Division; Chief Don Owens of the Titusville (Pennsylvania) Police Department; and Sheriff Mark Shook from the Watauga County (North Carolina) Sheriff’s Department.

We thank everyone for taking the time to join us this afternoon, and look forward to your testimony.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Prepared Remarks of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales at the National District Attorneys Association Meeting, Portland, ME. July 18, 2005. www.usdoj.gov.